

Moving with Children

Overview

How you can help preschool and school-age children cope with a move and adjust to their new home.

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Moving can be stressful for any parent. With everything that's going on in your life as you get ready to move, it may be easy to forget that your children are probably excited and worried, too. They may not understand what's going on as well as you do, so it's important that you pay some extra attention to them, listen to them, and help them through the changes they'll be facing.

Depending on their ages, your children may have very different concerns about the move. Your 3-year-old may think that the family pet will be left behind, and may be unhappy for days without saying why. Your 6-year-old may worry that he won't make any friends in his new neighborhood, and may be very sad about leaving his school. Or your 10-year-old may be afraid that she won't fit in at her new middle school, and may suddenly become tearful or withdrawn.

You can make your move easier for your children by dealing promptly and thoughtfully with their concerns. Even though you have a lot of other things on your mind, a little time from you at each step of the way can make a big difference in how well they cope with the move and adjust to their new home. Let your children know that you see moving as an adventure for the whole family, and chances are that they will share your feeling.

Breaking the news

- *Talk to your children about your plans.* Explain when, where, and why you are moving. By helping your children understand what's really going on you can help them keep their worries in perspective.
- *Give your children plenty of time to adjust.* Although young children may not understand everything you tell them, it doesn't hurt to talk to them about your plans, even a few months in advance. Whatever the ages of your children, it's much better for them to find out about the move from you instead of from friends or overheard conversations.
- *Be realistic.* Don't promise your children that they will love everything about their new home or make lots of friends right away. Let them know it may take a while for them to feel comfortable but that you will be there to help them when they need you.
- *Focus on the good things about the move.* Your children will pick up on your feelings about the move. If you're unhappy about the move, your children probably will be, too. If you're excited, they'll be likely to share your enthusiasm.

Helping your children prepare for the move

After you've told young children about the move, they may still have questions and concerns. Here are some ideas that may help in the weeks before the moving van arrives:

- *Try to understand your children's needs and worries.* It's normal for children to feel sad about leaving familiar places and friends or anxious about what lies ahead. Remember that your children take their worries just as seriously as you take your own, although their worries may be very different from yours. Listen to their concerns and take the time to talk things through.
- *Recognize that your children may have mixed feelings about the move.* Try to understand both their excitement and their fears. Be patient if they're thrilled one minute and sad the next. Your children might find it reassuring to know that you have mixed feelings, too. You might say something like, "I'm really excited about moving into our new house, but I'll miss that apple tree in our back yard."
- *Expect some changes in behavior.* During a move it's normal for children to become fussy or moody. Younger children may "unlearn" their toilet training for a few weeks or "forget" other skills. Older children may slip in their performance at school. Try to see these lapses as signals of your child's worries and be as helpful as you can. Things probably will straighten out soon after you are settled in your new home.
- *Try to make extra time for your children.* With everything else that you have to do, your children need to know that you're still there for them. Set aside some time every day just to focus on your children -- to go for a walk, tell a story, or just sit and talk. Even fifteen minutes of attention from you can make a big difference.
- *Talk about your new home.* Get pictures of your new home and give copies to your children. If you're not moving far, take them to see their new home. Take a walk around your new neighborhood. Even a look at the outside of the home can make the move seem more real and less frightening.
- *If you have school-age children, contact the new school.* You will need to register your children, and you may be required to send medical forms and other information. You might also send the school information about your child's special strengths, likes, and dislikes. Try to find out who their teachers will be, and, if you are moving during the school year, what their classes are working on and reading. If you do find out the teachers' names, help your children write letters introducing themselves. A friendly letter from a teacher can be a wonderful reassurance to a child who's nervous about starting at a new school.
- *Help your children learn about your new community.* Call or write to the Chamber of Commerce in your new community and ask for brochures, maps, and information on activities that might interest your children. You might take out books from the library or visit the travel section of your local bookstore. If your children like computers, help them visit the Web site for their new school or town. Involve your children in the detective work of finding out about their new community.
- *Start a scrapbook.* Putting together a scrapbook can help your children feel part of the activity of a move. It can also help them sort through what's coming and what they're leaving behind. You

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might help a younger child paste in pictures from brochures or sections from maps of the new community. An older child might fill the scrapbook with pictures or notes from friends, postcards, or clippings from a newspaper.

- *Make a comic book.* Creating a comic book about the move might ease some of your children's worries by letting them imagine different things that might happen. Your children can draw pictures or cut them out of magazines and write stories for them. Suggest that they include scenes about packing, leaving school, and making new friends. Talk to your children about why they included certain pictures and encourage them to laugh about some of their ideas.
- *Encourage school-age children to keep a journal.* Some children find it easier to write about their feelings in a diary than to talk about them. Keeping a journal can help an older child sort through her confused feelings about a move and or record her impressions of her friends. If your child likes to draw, you might give her a book with blank pages so she can draw pictures of her old or new community.
- *Give your children some control over the move.* Ask them for their ideas about the decisions you have to make. They'll feel better if they are part of what's going on and know that you are interested in their views. Encourage them to make decisions about which of their possessions to keep and which to throw or give away.
- *Ask your children for help with the move.* Letting your children help with the practical aspects of the move will give them a better sense of what's happening. Even a preschooler can help tape boxes or draw pictures on them to show what's inside. Older children may enjoy some special tasks: the family historian to keep a journal of the move; the photographer to record the before, during, and after; the purchaser to buy snacks and souvenirs during the trip.
- *Help your children think about and plan for their new rooms.* Buy or make something special for each bedroom: a poster, a decoration to put in the window, or a plant. Even talking about colors and looking at a few paint chips can help your children get excited about their new home.
- *If you'll be moving during the summer, plan for what your children will do before school or child care starts.* Find out if there are day camps, community recreation programs, or summer sports leagues, and register ahead of time. Plan some fun family activities, too. Is there a beach or park nearby? What kinds of day trips can you take? Plan some fun activities to do as a family. These will help your children enjoy their new community while they are waiting to make new friends.
- *Let your children help pack their own travel bags.* Let each child pick out special toys, games, a bedtime storybook, a favorite blanket, a pair of pajamas, or other items that will go into the car or the carry-on luggage on the plane. These will help keep your children busy during the trip and reassure them that their favorite things won't get lost.

Saying goodbye

Saying goodbye is an important way for children to gain control over their feelings of loss.

Especially if your children have never moved before, they may not understand what is involved in a move. You can help them deal with their confusion and create happy memories by planning a few goodbye rituals.

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- *Encourage your children to say goodbye to their favorite people.* These might include friends, teachers, librarians, neighbors, coaches, doctors, and other community members. Help your children plan ways to stay in touch with people they especially like. For example, you might teach your children to tape-record letters to friends or give them colorful postcards they can use to stay in touch. You might also give older children disposable cameras to take pictures of people they want to remember.
- *Help your children say goodbye to places, too.* Your children may have a special attachment to a zoo, a park, or a church or synagogue. Plan special visits to these places and let your children take pictures of them.
- *Take a walk around your neighborhood.* Gather the family together and take a walk around the neighborhood. Look back on the happy times you've had there and talk about what it will be like to leave. Talk about some of the exciting things about your new neighborhood, too. This will help your children acknowledge their sense of loss while they also look forward to the adventure of discovering a new community.
- *Have a goodbye party.* A fun event can make saying goodbye easier for your family. Give each child who attends a party favor -- for example, a small address book with your children's new address written in. Make sure your children get address books and collect friends' addresses, too. You might also take pictures or give your children autograph books and ask everyone at the party to sign them. Or ask each guest to bring going-away letters to your children. Save the going-away letters and surprise your children with them on moving day or just after you've moved into your new home.
- *Plan a special goodbye at child care or school.* Talk to your children's teachers or child care providers and find out if the school or center has any special rituals for children who are leaving. Find out how you can be part of these or what else you can do to help your children say goodbye to friends and classmates.

During the move

Whether you're moving across country or just a few miles away, you can make the trip easier with a little advance planning.

- *Make sure that all family members take part in the move.* If you send your children to a relative's house on moving day, they may fail to grasp the reality of the move. Try to find a way for even very young children take part in the move. This will help them understand that a big change is taking place in their lives and, if they're confused, will give them a chance to ask questions.
- *Keep favorite toys or belongings where children can get them during a move.* After your children have packed their special travel bags or boxes, keep these in an accessible place during the move -- in the car you'll drive or as carry-on luggage on the plane. Make sure they're among the first things you bring in when you reach your new home.
- *Plan to have some new toys, games, or activities for the trip.* Depending on the ages of your children and how you are traveling, these might include story tapes, books, markers and paper, a

journal, a magnetic board game, binoculars, and simple “sitting still” toys like magnets, magic tricks, dolls, or cards.

- *Ask a child to play “navigator.”* Mark the route beforehand and let a child “lead” the way. Encourage all your children to help you look for landmarks that will help them get to know their new community -- a park, a statue of a soldier, a funny sign or billboard.
- *Pack some healthy snacks to eat along the way.* It can be hard to find fresh fruit, raisins, nuts, cheese, or even juice when you are on a long trip.
- *Make the trip fun.* If your move involves a long car trip, plan for fun stops along the way -- a visit to a museum, a theme park, or some other attraction that’s on your route.

Unpacking and settling in

- *Unpack some of your children’s belongings first.* You will need to get the kitchen and living room set up, too, but it will be easier on you in the long run if your children can be settling into their rooms at the same time.
- *Unpack the TV and the VCR promptly.* Unloading a moving van can take hours, so you’re probably going to need more than a few toys and games to keep your children busy on moving day. If you unpack the TV and VCR right away, they can watch their favorite video while they’re waiting for the rest of their belongings to be unloaded.
- *Encourage your school-age children to unpack some of their own belongings.* This can give them a sense of control over the move, especially if you let them make some decisions about how to arrange their toys or books.
- *Celebrate your family’s arrival.* You probably won’t be able to unpack in a single day. So, after you’ve taken care of a few basics, ask your children to suggest a way to celebrate your arrival in your new home. Getting a pizza or going to a movie might reassure your children that everything won’t change just because you’ve moved.
- *Make sure your home is safe.* If you have an infant or toddler, make sure that electrical outlets are covered and that small objects are put out of reach as you unpack. Put up gates or keep doors closed at the tops and bottoms of stairways and put dangerous objects like knives away in drawers or cabinets with safety locks.
- *Hold onto your sense of humor.* All of you may be tired after your trip or wish your new home looked perfect right away. But if you can laugh about how you packed the used kitty litter or got lost three blocks from your new home, your children probably will be able to see the humor in their experiences, too.

After the move

After you’ve arrived, your children may still have some big adjustments ahead of them. Here are ways to make their lives easier:

- *Keep up your children’s favorite rituals.* Think about the things you always try to do together as a family -- reading a bedtime story, watching a favorite TV program, making pancakes on Saturday

morning. Make a special effort to keep doing these things in your new home. Keeping up family rituals can give your children a sense of comfort and security when a lot of other things in their lives are changing.

- *Let your children know any rules you've made for your new home.* These might include rules about streets in the neighborhood, where and when they can go outside, and what parts of the community are off limits (train tracks, dumps, highways, and so on).
- *Take breaks from unpacking every day.* Explore your new neighborhood, meet the neighbors, and find out where things are. Spending some time learning about your new community can help your children stay interested in and excited about in their new surroundings after the initial excitement of the move has worn off.
- *Get a map of the new community.* Help your children mark the new things you are discovering: where your home is, the school, the library, a new friend's home, the fire station, the closest place to get pizza.
- *Try to meet some families in your neighborhood.* Your children probably will have an easier time if they meet one or two classmates from their new school, make friends with other children in the neighborhood, or meet other children from their child care before they start. Making friends right away can make a huge difference in how easily your children adjust to a new place.
- *Bring your children to visit their new school or child care before the first day.* If you can, make arrangements to let a preschooler explore his new child care when other children aren't there so he can meet his new caregiver, learn where things are, and see what there is to play with. Older children may be more comfortable if they know the route to the school and where they can find things like the classrooms, the bathrooms, the library, and the gym. See if you can introduce your children to teachers when you visit.
- *Ask the teacher or principal if the school can assign each of your children a "buddy."* Children might find it easier to cope with a lot of new faces if at least one student is friendly, encouraging, and willing to help with problems such as opening a tricky locker.
- *Invite neighbors with children for a visit.* Encourage your children to pay attention to where the other children live on your street or in your apartment building so that they can help you figure out whom they might like to get to know.
- *Sign your children up for extracurricular activities.* Right after a move is a good time to think about getting your children involved in ballet classes, sports teams, Scouting programs, or music or theater groups.
- *Let your children know that it's OK to miss their old friends or school.* Your children may find it reassuring to hear you say that you miss *your* best friend, too, or got lost while you were trying to find the bathroom at your new office. Let your children know that it isn't their fault that everything isn't perfect right away -- even adults have trouble adjusting.
- *Help your children call, write, or e-mail old friends.* They'll probably be eager to stay in touch over the first few weeks, and less so as time goes by. Don't push them if they're not ready. For school-

age children, you may want to establish a “phone allowance” so they understand the limits of time and phone bills, but have the opportunity to stay in touch.

- *Keep using the scrapbook to make a record of your new home.* Encourage the keeper of the scrapbook to draw pictures of your new home or neighborhood, write in the names of people you’re meeting, or paste in photographs of your new back yard. He can also look back through it to remind himself of the people and places he’s left behind.
- *Encourage your children to introduce themselves to other children.* Set an example by introducing yourself to other parents or to children at the park or playground.
- *Wait a while to buy new furniture.* Your old furniture may not fit well into your new home. But a familiar bed, chair, or clown lamp can give a child a sense of comfort and security. She might have an easier time adjusting if she doesn’t have to live with new furniture, especially in her room, while she is getting used to a new home.
- *Give your children time to adjust.* It will take time for all of you to settle in and feel comfortable. It’s normal for children to be moody after a move, even to have spells of unhappiness months later. Children are often nostalgic about their old home or neighborhood and may say things like, “I want to live in our old house again.” These feelings are part of the process of adjustment. If you can see them in that light and not take them as criticism of the move, you’ll be better able to give the reassurance and security your children need.

After you’ve settled in, try to keep up some links to the past as you become part of a new community. It’s normal for children to take six months or more to adjust to a new home. Spend time with your children -- listening, explaining, and reassuring -- and the adjustment will go more smoothly for your entire family.